

THE POETIC ATTACK ON CYNTHIA: PROPERTIUS 2.5 27-8

*scribam igitur quod non umquam tua deleat aetas,
,Cynthia, forma potens: Cynthia uerba leuis.*⁶

On the face of it Propertius is saying that since he is a poet, one whose head is encircled by ivy (26), his punishment for the unfaithful Cynthia will be to write vitriolic poetry against her¹). But the threat actually fits the situation better than scholars have realised and is generically very opposite. From 21 Propertius has been telling Cynthia how he will *not* punish her: he will not tear her clothes, beat her or break down her doors. The situation which he envisages is the well-known komastic situation in which the excluded lover often threatens (and occasionally inflicts) violence against door or girl or both: cf. *AP* 12. 252. 1 (Straton), Theoc. 2. 128, Athenaeus 13. 585a, Herodas 2. 34ff. (with Headlam *ad loc*), Terence *Ad.* 102, 120, Tib. 1. 1. 73-4, 1. 10. 53 (perhaps imitated by Propertius here²), Prop. 2. 19. 5, Ovid *Am.* 2. 19. 39, *Ars* 3. 71-2, *Rem. Am.* 31. What Propertius will do instead is write vitriolic poetry *on her doors*, as komasts often do when they realise their entreaties are fruitless³): cf. *AP* 5. 191. 5-6 (Meleager), [Theoc.] 23. 45-81; cf. also the variations *AP* 12. 23 (Meleager) and Callipurnius Siculus 3. 90-1. Propertius' inscription will begin with praise of Cynthia's beauty, as lovers' graffiti usually did (cf. *AP* 12. 130 [Anon], 12. 129 [Aratus], Lucian *Amores* 16, Callim fr. 73, Aristoph. *Ach* 144), but it will have a sting in its tail, a denunciation of her treachery which all passers-by will be able to read. In this Propertius follows the Roman tradition in which such inscriptions on the door contained an indictment (often obscene) of the girl's scandalous behaviour, to be read by passers-by; cf. Prop. 1. 16. 10, Plautus *Merc.* 409 and the variation Catullus 67. 1ff.⁴). Hence Cynthia's *pallor*, occasioned by her feelings of guilt when her scandalous behaviour is known to all⁵). Propertius does not feel obliged to state baldly

1) The real reason for his refusal to inflict physical punishment on her, however, we can see in 23-4: he would not *dare* do it! Propertius' readers are well aware from Book I (and especially 1.3) of the character of the woman involved.

2) See F. Solmsen "Propertius in his literary relations with Tibullus and Virgil" *Philologus* 105 (1961) 274.

3) For a rather different interpretation (but one which recognises that Propertius' poetry is an inscription for Cynthia's door or wall) see Erich Burck "Sextus Propertius: Elegie II 5" *Antike Lyrik* ed. W. Eisenhut (Darmstadt 1970) 444ff. Burck sees line 28 as a *difffamatio*.

4) See F. O. Copley "The Suicide-Paraclausithyron" *TAPA* 71 (1940) 61, note 27.

5) For pallor arising from a guilty conscience, cf. Ovid *Met.* 8.465, *Trist* 3.9.18, Hor. *Epist* 1.1.61 etc. I wonder if one might see the line *Cynthia forma potens, Cynthia uerba leuis* not as the actual inscription, but as

that the inscription is for Cynthia's door: his readers would be well aware of the nature of such verses and would realise from 21 ff. that he is referring to komastic activity. Similarly, in the *Amores*, Ovid makes Elegeia say of herself *vel quotiens foribus duris incisa pependi non verita a populo praetereunte legi* (*Am.* 3. 1. 53-4)⁶, and the reader is aware that the grounds for the fear (which Elegy might be expected to feel but in fact does not) are that the elegiac complets are of this scurrilous nature.

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the substance of Propertius' scurrilous inscription. This might better explain why a woman whose *nequitia* is already known citywide (1) would blanch at it and why her reputation would be stained for ever (27) – Propertius would go into details.

6) The reading *incisa* has been impugned by G.P. Goold (*HSCP* 69 [1965] 45 f.). See, however, W. Stroh *Die Römische Elegie als Werbende Dichtung* (Amsterdam 1971) 188 note 52.